

SIDE-PUMPED SOLID-STATE DISK LASER FOR HIGH-AVERAGE POWER

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

5 [0001] This application is a continuation-in-part of United States Patent Application No. 09/767,202 filed on January 22, 2001, which is presently pending and allowed, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference.

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] This invention relates to solid-state lasers, and more particularly to an active mirror amplifier laser having a side-pumped gain medium disposed in contact with an actively cooled substrate.

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] In solid-state lasers (SSL), optical pumping generates a large amount of heat within a laser medium and increases its temperature. 20 Continuous operation of the laser, therefore, requires removal of the waste heat by cooling selected surfaces of the laser medium. Because SSL media typically have a low thermal conductivity, a significant thermal gradient is created between the hot interior and the cooled outer surfaces. This causes a gradient in the index of refraction, mechanical stresses, depolarization, 25 detuning, and other effects, with likely consequences of degraded beam quality, reduced laser power, and possibly a fracture of the SSL medium. Such effects present a major challenge to scaling of SSLs to high-average power (HAP). Pumping by semiconductor laser diodes, which was introduced in the last decade, greatly reduces the amount of waste heat and paves the 30 way for development of a HAP-SSL with good beam quality. Such lasers are expected to make practical new industrial processes such as precision laser

degrade beam quality. A class of SSL known as "active mirror amplifier" (AMA) originally disclosed by Almasi et al. in U.S. Pat. No. 3,631,362 (1971) has shown effective reduction of transverse temperature gradients and demonstrated the generation of a laser output with very good beam quality.

5 See, for example, J. Abate et al., "Active Mirror: A large-aperture Medium Repetition Rate Nd: Glass Amplifier," Appl. Opt. Vol. 20, no. 2, 351-361 (1981) and D. C. Brown et al., "Active-mirror Amplifier: Progress and Prospects," IEEE J. of Quant. Electr., vol. 17, no. 9, 1755-1765 (1981).

[0005] In the classical AMA concept, a large aspect ratio, edge-suspended, Nd-Glass disk (or slab) several centimeters thick is pumped by flashlamps and liquid-cooled on the back face. However, this device is not suitable for operation at HAP because of poor heat removal and resulting thermo-mechanical distortion of the edge-suspended disk. Previous attempts to mitigate these problems and increase the average power output of an AMA were met with encouraging but limited results. In recent years, the AMA concept has been revived in the form of a "thin disk laser" introduced by Brauch et al. in U.S. Pat. No. 5,553,088. The thin disk laser uses a gain medium disk which is several millimeters in diameter and 200-400 .mu.m in thickness soldered to a heat sink. See, for example, A. Giesen et al., "Scalable concept for diode-pumped high-power lasers," Appl. Phys. B vol. 58, 365-372 (1994). The diode-pumped Yb:YAG thin disk laser has demonstrated laser outputs approaching 1 kW average power and with beam quality around 12 times the diffraction limit. See, for example, C. Stewen et al., "1-kW CW Thin Disk Laser," IEEE J. of Selected Topics in Quant. Electr., vol. 6, no. 4, 650-657 (July/August 2000). Another variant of the thin disk laser can be found in L. Zapata et al., "Composite Thin-Disk Laser Scalable To 100 kW Average Power Output and Beyond," in Technical Digest from the Solid-State and Diode Laser Technology Review held in Albuquerque, N.Mex., Jun. 5-8, 2000.

30 [0006] The applicant's US patent No. 6,339,605 titled Active Mirror Amplifier System and Method for a High-Average Power Laser System, hereby incorporated by reference, discloses a new AMA concept, which is

suitable for operation at high-average power. The invention uses a large aperture laser gain medium disk about 2.5mm in thickness and with a diameter typically between 5 cm and 15 cm mounted on a rigid, cooled substrate. Note that the disk thickness in this AMA concept is about 10 times
5 less than in the classical AMA and about 10 times more than in the thin disk laser. The substrate contains a heat exchanger and microchannels on the surface facing the laser medium disk. The disk is attached to the substrate by a hydrostatic pressure differential between the surrounding atmosphere and the gas or liquid medium in the microchannels. This novel approach permits
10 thermal expansion of the laser medium disk in the transverse direction while maintaining a thermally loaded disk in a flat condition. The teachings of this co-pending patent application provide numerous advantages over prior art SSL and allow generation of near diffraction limited laser output at very high-average power from a relatively compact device.

15 [0007] The above-mentioned patent No. 6,339,605 also teaches two principal methods for providing pump radiation into the AMA disk, namely 1) through the large(front or back) face of the disk, or 2) through the sides (edges) of the disk. The former method is often referred to as "face pumping" and is further elaborated on in J. Vetrovec,"Diode-pumped Active Mirror
20 Amplifier For High-Average Power," in proc. from Lasers 2000 Conference held in Albuquerque, N.Mex., Dec. 4-8, 2000. This publication describes a face-pumped AMA with pump radiation from a diode array injected into the laser gain medium through an optically transparent substrate.

25 [0008] To make face pumping efficient, the AMA disk must absorb a large fraction of the pump radiation injected. This condition can be met by a certain combination of disk thickness and doping density of lasant ions. However, in many cases of interest it is impractical (or undesirable) to make the necessary increase in disk thickness or lasant doping level. For example, doping a yttrium-aluminum garnet (YAG) crystal with neodymium
30 (Nd.³⁺) ions beyond about 1.5% of atomic concentration is known to reduce the fluorescence time, broaden the line-width, and excessively stress the crystal due to a mismatch in size between the Nd atoms and yttrium

atoms (the latter being replaced in crystal lattice). Increasing the disk thickness is often undesirable as it also increases thermal impedance and leads to higher thermal stresses. These considerations limit design parameters of face-pumped AMA to a relatively narrow regime. Face pumping
5 is also impractical in conjunction with ytterbium (Yb^{3+}) lasant ions, which require very high pump intensities to overcome re-absorption of laser radiation by the ground energy state. For example, a 2.5 mm-thick AMA disk made of YAG crystal would require about 10% atomic doping concentration of Yb^{3+} ions to absorb 90% of face-injected pump radiation in two passes.
10 Such a high Yb concentration would require an unreasonably high pump intensity of about 34 kW/cm² to induce medium transparency at 1.03 μm wavelength, and several times this level to efficiently operate the laser. In this situation, injecting the pump radiation into the disk side (i.e., edge or perimeter) becomes an attractive alternative. Side-pumping takes advantage
15 of the long absorption path (approximately same dimension as the diameter of the gain medium disk), which permits doping the disk with a reduced concentration of lasant ions. This in turn reduces requirements for pump radiation intensity.

[0009] While side-pumping may be a suitable method for
20 delivering pump radiation, several associated technical challenges still need to be overcome, such as: 1) delivering and concentrating pump radiation into the relatively small area around the disk perimeter; 2) preventing overheating of the disk in the areas where the pump radiation is injected; 3) generating uniform laser gain over the AMA aperture; and 4) avoiding laser gain
25 depletion by amplified spontaneous emission (ASE) and parasitic oscillations. The significance of these challenges and related solutions disclosed in the prior art are discussed below.

[0010] Concentration of Pump Radiation

[0011] Modern SSL are optically pumped by semiconductor lasers
30 commonly known as laser diodes. Because each laser diode produces a relatively small optical output (up to a few watts), pumping of SSL for HAP requires the combined output of a great many laser diodes (typically in

quantities ranging from hundreds to hundreds of thousands). For this purpose the diodes are arranged in one-dimensional arrays often called "bars" containing about 10 to 20 diodes and two-dimensional arrays often called "stacks" containing several hundred diodes. Stacks are typically produced by 5 stacking about 10-20 bars and mounting them onto a heat exchanger. A good example of commercially available stacks is the Model SDL-3233-MD available from SDL, Inc., of San Jose, Calif., which can produce 200 .mu.s-long optical pulses with a total output of 960 watts at a maximum 20% duty factor. SSL for HAP may require a combined power of multiple units of this 10 type to produce desired pumping effect in the laser gain medium. Regardless of the grouping configuration, individual laser diodes emit optical radiation from a surface, which is about 1 .mu.m high and on the order of 100 .mu.m wide. As a result, the beamlet of radiation emitted from this surface is highly asymmetric: highly divergent in a direction of the 1 .mu.m dimension (so 15 called "fast axis") and moderately divergent in the transverse dimension (so-called "slow axis"). This situation is illustrated in FIG. 2. Typical fast axis divergence angles (full-width at half-maximum intensity) range from 30 to 60 degrees, while slow axis divergence angles typically range from 8 to 12 degrees. Optical radiation from an array of diodes has similar properties. High 20 divergence in the fast axis makes it more challenging to harness the emitted power of diode arrays for use in many applications of practical interest. Some manufacturers incorporate microlenses in their laser diode arrays to reduce fast axis divergence to as little as a few degrees. An example of such a product is the lensed diode array Model LAR23P500 available from Industrial 25 Microphotonics Company in St. Charles, Mo., which includes microlenses which reduce fast axis divergence to less than three degrees.

[0012] The intensity of the optical output of diode arrays (lensed or unlensed) is frequently insufficient to pump a SSL gain medium to inversion, and the radiation must therefore be further concentrated. In previously 30 developed systems, optical trains with multiple reflecting and/or refracting elements have been used. See, for example, F. Daiminger et al., "High-power Laser Diodes, Laser Diode Modules And Their Applications," SPIE volume

3682, pages 13-23, 1998. Another approach disclosed by Beach et al., in U.S. Pat. No. 5,307,430 uses a lensing duct generally configured as a tapered rod of rectangular cross-section made of a material optically transparent at laser pump wavelength. Operation of this device relies on the combined effect of 5 lensing at the curved input surface and channeling by total internal reflection. Light is concentrated as it travels from the larger area input end of the duct to the smaller area exit end. Yet another approach for concentrating pump radiation disclosed by Beach et al. in U.S. Pat. No. 6,160,939 uses a combination of a lens and a hollow tapered duct with highly reflective internal 10 surfaces.

[0013] Thermal Control of Disk Perimeter

[0014] The surfaces of the laser gain medium that receive pump radiation are susceptible to overheating and, as a result, to excessive thermal stresses. Experience with end-pumped rod lasers shows that a composite rod 15 having a section of doped and undoped laser material provides improved thermal control and concomitant reduction in thermal stresses. See, for example, R. J. Beach et al., "High-Average Power Diode-pumped Yb:YAG Lasers," UCRL-JC-133848 available from the Technical Information Department of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, U.S. Department 20 of Energy. A suitable method for constructing composite optical materials of many different configurations is disclosed by Meissner in U.S. Pat. No. 5,846,634.

[0015] Uniform Laser Gain Across the Aperture

[0016] Due to the exponential absorption of pump radiation, portions 25 of the laser gain medium that are closer to the pump source are susceptible to being pumped more intensely than portions that are further away. Non-uniform deposition of pump energy results in non-uniform gain. Gain non-uniformities across the laser beam aperture (normal to the laser beam axis) are highly undesirable as they lead to degradation of beam quality. In prior art 30 devices, non-uniform pump absorption has been compensated for in a side-pumped rod laser by the gain medium being fabricated with a radially varying level of doping. An alternate approach known as "bleach-wave pumping" has

been proposed by W. Krupke in "Ground-state Depleted Solid-state Lasers: Principles, Characteristics and Scaling," Opt. and Quant. Electronics, vol. 22, S1-S22 (1990). Bleach wave pumping largely depletes the atoms in the ground energy state and pumps them into higher energy states. Achieving
5 high uniformity of gain becomes even more challenging as the incident laser beam causes saturation-induced change in the spatial distribution of gain. Thus, the weaker portions of the signal are amplified relatively more than the stronger portions because they saturate the medium to a lesser degree.

[0017] Amplified Spontaneous Emission (ASE)

10 [0018] Amplified Spontaneous Emission (ASE) is a phenomenon wherein spontaneously emitted photons traverse the laser gain medium and are amplified before they exit the gain medium. The favorable condition for ASE is a combination of high gain and a long path for the spontaneously emitted photons. ASE depopulates the upper energy level in an excited laser
15 gain medium and robs the laser of its power. Furthermore, reflection of ASE photons at gain medium boundaries may provide feedback for parasitic oscillations that aggravate the loss of laser power. If unchecked, ASE may become large enough to deplete the upper level inversion in high-gain laser amplifiers. Experimental data suggests that in q-switched rod amplifiers ASE
20 loss becomes significant when the product of gain and length becomes larger than 2.25, and parasitic oscillation loss becomes significant when the product is larger than 3.69. See, for example, N. P. Barnes et al., "Amplified Spontaneous Emission--Application to Nd:YAG Lasers," IEEE J. of Quant. Electr., vol. 35, no. 1 (January 2000). Continuous wave (CW) or quasi-CW
25 lasers are less susceptible to ASE losses because their upper level population (and hence their gain) is clamped.

[0019] A traditional method for controlling ASE losses to an acceptable level is disclosed, for example, by Powell et al. in U.S. Pat. No. 4,849,036. This method involves cladding selected surfaces of the laser gain
30 medium with a material that can efficiently absorb ASE radiation. To reduce the reflection of ASE rays at the cladding junction, the cladding material must have an index of refraction at the laser wavelength that is closely matched to

that of the laser gain medium. Recently, another method for ASE loss control was introduced. In this method, ASE rays are channeled out of selected laser gain medium surfaces into a trap from which they are prevented from returning. See, for example, R. J. Beach et al., "High-average Power Diode-pumped Yb:YAG Lasers," *supra*.

5 [0020] Materials and Methods for Low Waste Heat

[0021] To operate a SSL at HAP, it is critical to reduce as much as possible the Stokes shift (difference between the lasing wavelength and the pump wavelength), which is the leading energy loss mechanism contributing 10 to production of waste heat. Waste heat is deposited into the gain medium where it is responsible for thermal lensing, mechanical stresses, depolarization, degradation of beam quality (BQ), loss of laser power, and (in extreme cases) thermal fracture . Consequently, when pumping a HAP SSL, it is highly desirable to use pump absorption features in proximity to the laser 15 emission line.

[0022] The most important lasant ions for a HAP SSL operating near 1-micrometer wavelength are trivalent neodymium (Nd^{3+}) and trivalent ytterbium (Yb^{3+}). Each Nd and Yb can be doped into a variety of crystalline and amorphous host materials.

20 [0023] A side-pumped disk makes such is disclosed herein it possible to reduce the Stokes shift in many important materials and allow Nd and Yb lasers to operate more efficiently. In particular, neodymium ion Nd^{3+} is traditionally pumped by diodes on the 808-nm absorption line that has a large cross-section. In contrast, pumping Nd on a weaker absorption feature 25 around 885 nm deposits energy directly into the upper lasing level. Direct pumping improves Stokes efficiency by nearly 10% and entirely avoids the quantum efficiency loss (~5%) associated with energy transfer from the pump band to the upper lasing level. A side-pumped disk is amenable to direct pumping of Nd despite having a low absorption cross-section and narrow 30 width of absorption feature around 880 nm.

[0024] Ytterbium is characterized by a Stokes shift several times smaller than for Neodymium. Yb:YAG and Yb:GGG are traditionally pumped

at the broad absorption feature around 941nm. A more efficient approach is to pump Yb at the zero-phonon line around 970 nm, which offers a smaller Stokes shift and deposits energy directly into the upper laser level.

[0025] A side-pumped disk laser is amenable to pumping ytterbium
5 despite its rather low absorption cross-sections in many host materials of practical interest, namely YAG, GGG, and glass. Low absorption cross-section makes it more problematic to absorb pump energy in a short distance, as may be desirable for face-pumping of disk and slab lasers or side-pumping rod lasers. A short absorption path in combination with small absorption
10 cross-section necessitates high doping which, in turn, requires very high pump intensities to overcome re-absorption of laser radiation by the ground energy state. This problem is resolved with the side-pumped disk of subject invention, which offers a long absorption path.

[0026] Athermal Glass

[0027] Waste heat deposited into a SSL gain medium causes temperature changes which result in thermo-optic distortions that may affect the optical phase-front of the amplified laser beam and degrade its beam quality. Such distortions include thermal expansion, change to the index of refraction (n), and thermal stress-induced birefringence. Materials have been developed that reduce some of these effects. In particular, a glass composition known as athermal glass compensates for the positive coefficient of thermal expansion by a negative coefficient of change to the refractive index (dn/dt) to produce a very low thermal coefficient of optical path. Glass with athermal properties is sold by Kigre Inc. of Hilton Head Island, SC under designations Q-98 and Q-100; and by Schott Glass Technologies, Inc., in Duryea, PA under designation LG-760.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0028] In view of the foregoing limitations with previously developed AMAs, it is an object of the present invention to provide an active mirror amplifier (AMA) capable of operating at high-average power and with good

beam quality (BQ). In particular, the AMA of the present invention meets a number of significant needs:

- [0029] a side-pumped AMA for a HAP;
- 5 [0030] means to avoid excessive losses to ASE and parasitic oscillations;
- [0031] means for trapping ASE rays and significantly reducing feedback to parasitic oscillations;
- 10 [0032] means for concentrating pump radiation for injection into the AMA disk side;
- 10 [0033] means for concentrating pump radiation by a circular arrangement of pump sources;
- [0034] means for alleviating thermal stresses and reducing the temperature near surfaces of the laser gain medium where pump radiation is injected;
- 15 [0035] means for controlling the gain profile across the AMA aperture;
- [0036] means for efficient operation of an AMA-HAP with quasi-3 level laser media such as Yb.sup.3+;
- 20 [0037] means for efficient operation of an AMA-HAP with laser media exhibiting high pump saturation intensities;
- [0038] an AMA with laser diode pump means that reduces the waste heat load to the solid-state laser medium;
- 25 [0039] a relatively thin solid-state medium to allow efficient conduction of waste heat;
- [0040] microchannel cooling of a support substrate for efficient removal of waste heat from the laser gain medium;
- 30 [0041] a substrate which provides rigid mechanical support for the solid-state laser medium;
- [0042] the use of concentrator ducts for the delivery of pump power to the sides (edges) of the AMA laser gain medium;
- [0043] a composite gain medium assembly for the delivery of pump radiation, reduced thermal distortions and reduced ASE/parasitic losses;

[0044] hydrostatic pressure means to maintain the solid-state gain medium in an optically flat condition on said substrate;

[0045] attachment means that reduce thermally-induced distortions in the solid-state gain medium;

5 [0046] pre-forming laser gain medium to reduce thermally-induced stresses therein;

[0047] a longer absorption path for pump radiation, which allows reducing the laser gain medium doping requirements and concomitant reabsorption losses for the gain media of 3-level

10 [0048] lasers (e.g., Yb:YAG); and

[0049] a means for pressure-balanced coolant fluid transfer to cool the laser gain medium.

15 [0050] The AMA of the present invention can be used as a building block for construction of laser oscillators as well as laser amplifiers. In one preferred embodiment the invention comprises a laser gain medium having a front surface, a rear surface and a peripheral edge. The rear surface is attached to a cooled support substrate. One or more sources of optical pump radiation are disposed so as to inject optical pump radiation into one or more sections of the peripheral edge of the gain medium. Optionally, an undoped optical medium may be attached to the peripheral edge of the laser gain medium inbetween the peripheral edge and one of the sources of optical pump radiation. Alternatively, the undoped optical medium may cover the entire peripheral edge of the laser gain medium.

20 [0051] In one preferred embodiment a plurality of hollow, tapered ducts are arranged inbetween the peripheral edge of the laser gain medium and the sources of optical pump radiation. The hollow, tapered ducts help to direct or "channel" optical pump radiation in the peripheral edge of the laser gain medium. The sources of optical pump radiation are comprised of pluralities of laser diode arrays arranged to direct optical pump radiation 25 through the hollow, tapered ducts.

30 [0052] The precise shape of the laser gain medium may vary considerably, with circular, elliptical, rectangular, hexagonal, octagonal,

pentagonal, heptagonal and other polygonal shapes all being possible. The undoped optical medium may form one or a plurality of sections circumscribing the peripheral edge of the laser gain medium. The section(s) may be secured to the peripheral edge via an optically transparent bond.

- 5 Various preferred embodiments of the arrangement of the optical pump sources and the laser gain medium are disclosed.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0053] The various advantages of the present invention will become 5 apparent to one skilled in the art by reading the following specification and subjoined claims and by referencing the following drawings in which:

[0054] FIG. 1 is a perspective view of a prior art Active Mirror Amplifier (AMA) for high-average power;

[0055] FIG. 2 is a perspective view of a prior art laser diode 10 illustrating the divergence of a beamlet produced thereby;

[0056] FIG. 3 is a side cross-sectional view of an active mirror amplifier module in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention;

[0057] FIG. 4 is a highly enlarged view of portion 4 of the amplifier 15 in FIG. 3;

[0058] FIGS. 5a and 5b are side cross-sectional and front views, respectively, of the composite gain medium assembly;

[0059] FIGS. 6a-6f are cross-sectional views of several alternative forms of undoped optical material which can be practiced with the present 20 invention;

[0060] FIG. 7 is a front view of the active mirror amplifier module of the present invention;

[0061] FIGS. 8a and 8b are graphs illustrating how the radial variation of small-signal gain is affected by choices of diode divergence and 25 diode distance from the axial center of the laser gain medium;

[0062] FIG. 9 is a cross-sectional view of an alternative preferred embodiment of the active mirror amplifier module of the present invention which is especially suitable for tight packaging;

[0063] FIG. 10 is an edge view illustrating the stacking of a plurality 30 of laser diode arrays of pump source for improved delivery of optical pump radiation into the composite gain medium;

[0064] FIG. 11 illustrates a cross-sectional side view of a liquid-filled, tapered duct concentrator for directing pump radiation into the gain medium;

5 [0065] FIG. 12a is a side view of a composite gain medium disk in an unconstrained condition prior to reaching an operating temperature;

10 [0066] FIG. 12b is a view of the composite gain medium disk of FIG. 12a in an unconstrained condition which it would otherwise assume when reaching an operating temperature, and illustrating the tensile and compressive stresses on the disk when it is unconstrained and at an operating temperature;

[0067] FIG. 12c is a view of the composite gain medium disk of FIG. 12b constrained to a flat condition while at an operating temperature, illustrating the increased tensile and compressive forces;

15 [0068] FIG. 12d is a side view of a pre-formed, unconstrained composite gain medium disk prior to being heated;

[0069] FIG. 12e is a view of the pre-formed composite gain medium disk of FIG. 12d after same has been heated, and illustrating the magnitudes of the tensile and compressive forces it experiences;

20 [0070] FIG. 12f is a side view of a composite gain medium disk in a constrained condition prior to being heated, and illustrating the tensile and compressive forces experienced by the disk;

25 [0071] FIG. 12g is a side view of the composite gain medium disk in a constrained orientation after being heated, and illustrating the reduction and reversal of tensile and compressive forces experienced by the disk when constrained at an operating temperature; and

[0072] FIG 13 is a side view of an alternative preferred embodiment of the present invention that does not incorporate a substrate with cooling channels;

30 [0073] FIG 14 is a front view of the laser module of Figure 13;

[0074] FIG 15 is a side view of a plurality of laser gain mediums ganged in parallel to form flow channels therebetween; and

[0075] FIG 16 is a side view of a plurality of laser gain mediums ganged in parallel and having inserts therebetween to form narrow flow channels.

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DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

[0076] As used herein, "Laser gain medium" refers to an optical material having a host lattice doped with suitable ions, which in the present invention are pumped to a laser transition. Although the present invention is not limited to a specific lasing material or to a specific optical pump source, the preferred host lattice materials are yttrium aluminum garnet (YAG), gadolinium gallium garnet (GGG), gadolinium scandium gallium garnet (GSGG), lithium yttrium fluoride (YLF), yttrium vanadate, phosphate laser glass, silicate laser glass, athermal glass, sapphire, and transparent polycrystalline ceramic materials. Example of a suitable ceramic host material is polycrystalline YAG available from Baikowski International Corporation. Suitable dopants for this lasing medium include Ti, Cu, Co, Ni, Cr, Ce, Pr, Nd, Sm, Eu, Gd, Tb, Dy, Ho, Er, Tm, and Yb. The optical pump source is selected based on the absorption characteristics of the selected laser gain medium. Preferably, semiconductor diode lasers are used for the optical pump source. InGaAs diodes are preferred for pumping of Yb.³⁺ ions. "Undoped optical medium" refers to an optical material which is preferably substantially free of substances that can absorb optical pump radiation. Preferably, the undoped medium is of the same host material as the laser gain medium but it is not doped. However, in some variants of the invention, undoped optical medium may be slightly doped with ions which may absorb optical radiation at the wavelengths of the optical pump and/or the laser gain transition, but are not pumped to a population inversion. Undoped optical medium may be bonded to selected surfaces of the laser gain medium by a fusion bond, or diffusion bond, or other suitable means. Such bond should be mechanically strong, thermally conductive, and highly transparent at the laser wavelength as well as at pump wavelengths. The refractive index of the updoped optical medium

and the bond are preferably closely matched to that of the laser gain medium. A suitable bond can be produced by fusion bonding, diffusion bonding, or optical contacting followed by heat treatment. A fusion or diffusion bond may be produced, for example, by growing undoped crystal onto a doped crystal
5 boule or, in the case of glass, by casting undoped material around the perimeter of a doped core. A method for optical contacting followed by heat treatment is, for example, disclosed by Meissner in U.S.Pat. Nos. 5,441,803, 5,563,899 and 5,846,638 and is commercially available from Onyx Optics in Dublin, Calif.

10 [0077] Referring to FIGS. 3 and 4, there is shown a preferred embodiment of a solid-state active mirror amplifier module 10 in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention. The module 10 generally comprises a composite gain medium assembly 12, a substrate 46, optical pump sources 68, lenses 18, and tapered hollow ducts 20. The
15 composite gain medium assembly 12 and the substrate 46 form an active mirror assembly 21.

[0078] Referring now to FIG. 5a, the composite gain medium assembly 12 has two planar, mutually parallel surfaces, a front surface 22 and a back surface 24, both being ground flat and polished to optical quality. The
20 shape of the composite gain medium assembly 12 may vary widely but in one preferred form comprises an octogonal disk with a transverse dimension "D" several times greater than its thickness "T", as indicated in FIG. 5a. Typically, composite gain medium assembly 12 may have a thickness ranging approximately from 1 millimeter to 10 millimeters and transverse dimensions
25 ranging from about 10 millimeters to 300 millimeters. The composite gain medium assembly 12 could just as readily be formed in other various shapes such as (but not limited to) polygonal, circular or elliptical shapes if desired. Furthermore, while the use of the term "disk" is used herein to reference this component, it will be appreciated that the composite gain medium assembly
30 12 may take other forms which might not be viewed, strictly speaking, as a "disk".

[0079] Referring further to FIGS. 5a and 5b, the composite gain medium assembly 12 comprises a laser gain medium 26 and eight segments 28a of undoped optical material 28. The material of the laser gain medium disk 26 comprises a suitable solid-state laser gain medium such as, but not limited to, neodymium-doped yttrium-aluminum garnet (Nd:YAG), ytterbium doped-yttrium aluminum garnet (Yb:YAG), neodymium gadolinium gallium garnet (Nd:GGG), ytterbium-doped gadolinium gallium garnet (Yb:GGG), neodymium-doped glass (Nd:Glass) or ytterbium-doped glass (Yb:Glass) as stated above. The undoped optical medium 28 is attached around the perimeter of the laser gain medium 26 via an optical bond 30. The undoped optical medium 28 is preferably the same as the host medium used in the laser gain medium 26 but without the dopant laser ions. The optical bond 30 must be highly transparent to the optical pump radiation and laser radiation and have good thermal conductivity. A preferred method for constructing the bond 30 is the already mentioned method of optical contacting followed by heat treatment. Adjacent segments of undoped optical medium 28 do not necessarily need to be joined together. For example, FIG. 5b shows a gap 32 existing between adjacent undoped optical media 28a. Alternatively, some or all of the segments of the undoped medium can be jointed to produce an optically and mechanically monolithic unit. Surfaces 34 which receive optical pump radiation 36 (FIG. 3) have a dielectric coating 38 that is antireflective at optical pump radiation wavelengths. Furthermore, the optical bond 30 plane and (FIG. 5a) can be machined at a slight angle of 1-5 degrees off normal from surface 22 to reduce the possibility of direct ASE feedback to parasitic oscillations.

[0080] Referring now to FIG. 4, the back planar surface 24 has an optical coating 40 with high reflectivity at a laser wavelength. Such a coating can be dielectric or metallic, or a combination of several layers of metallic and dielectric coatings. The front surface 22 has an optical coating 42 that is antireflective at the laser wavelength. Optionally, the coatings 40 and 42 can also be individually made reflective at the optical pump wavelength in addition to their already mentioned properties with respect to the laser wavelength.

The back surface 24 is in contact with a surface 44 of a cooled, rigid substrate 46. The surface 44 contains an array of interconnected microchannels 48 extending generally over, but not beyond, the contact area between the flat portion of composite gain medium 12 and the substrate 46.

5 [0081] Referring further to FIGS. 3 and 4, the substrate 46 contains a heat exchanger 50 that is located below the surface 44 and not connected to the microchannels 48. Coolant 52 is provided to the heat exchanger 50 by an inlet header 54 and drained therefrom by the outlet header 56. Internal distribution of the coolant 52 inside the heat exchanger 50 is such so as to provide a uniform cooling effect over a large part of the back surface 24 of the composite gain medium assembly 12. Suitable coolants may include liquids such as water, alcohol, members from the Freon.RTM. family, and liquid nitrogen. Preferably, coolant fluid connections to the inlet header 54 and the outlet header 56 are provided by pressure-balanced, axially-movable fluid transfer tubes such as disclosed by Eitel in U.S. Pat. No. 4,029,400, the disclosure of which is incorporated by reference herein. Such fluid transfer tubes isolate hydraulic pressure loads from the substrate 46 and coolant supply so that alignment of substrate 46 will not be affected. In addition, the fluid transfer tubes balance the hydraulic forces caused by the coolant pressure so that the substrate will not have any significant load placed upon it to interfere with its operation. Furthermore, such fluid transfer tubes permit small axial and lateral adjustments of substrate 46 such as may be required to optically align the laser gain medium 12 without affecting the operation of the fluid transfer tubes or placing forces on the substrate from the tubes.

25 [0082] The cooled substrate 46 is made of a material with good thermal conductivity, preferably copper, tungsten, molybdenum, sapphire, silicon carbide, silicon, but other materials with good thermal conductivity and suitable for microchannel and heat exchanger fabrication can be used. The material of the substrate 46 can also be chosen to have a coefficient of thermal expansion close to that of the laser gain medium 26. Surface 44 of substrate 46 is machined to optical flatness except for penetrations created by the microchannels 48. Typical dimensions for the microchannels 48 include a

width of about 0.005 inch to 0.040 inch (0.13 mm-1 mm) and a cross sectional area of about 0.000025 inch²-0.0016 inch² (0.00016125 cm²-0.01032 cm²). Microchannels 48 preferably occupy about 50% of the contact area between surface 44 of substrate 46 and back surface 24 of composite gain medium 12. The microchannels 48 may also be formed in a variety of cross-sectional shapes, but preferably have a generally square cross-sectional shape. The thickness of the substrate 46 is chosen to provide mechanical rigidity necessary to ensure that the surface 44 remains optically flat under operational conditions.

[0083] When optically flat surfaces are brought into contact, they may become bonded even without bonding agents. Such bonds can be attributed to Van der Waals forces of attraction acting at opposing contact points and surfaces. Such bonding remains stable as long as the components of the composite are not subjected to temperature gradients that cause non-uniform thermal expansion, and resultant stress to overcome this bond strength. However, the bond may also be broken by inserting a strong thin object, for example a razor blade, between the optically contacted surfaces. De-bonding also results when liquids diffuse into the interface from the edge which constitutes the bond line.

[0084] In the present invention a positive contact between the back surface 24 of composite gain medium assembly 12 and surface 44 of the substrate 46 is maintained by a pressure differential between the higher pressure of the atmosphere 58 surrounding the amplifier module 10 and the lower pressure inside the microchannels 48. The microchannels 48 can be filled with either liquid (including liquid metals) or gas and are maintained at a pressure substantially lower than that of the atmosphere 58. One benefit of using liquid to fill the microchannels 48 is enhanced heat transfer due to increased thermal conductivity. The required pressure differential to maintain the surfaces 24 and 44 in contact over large portions of their areas is typically several tens of PSI. Such a continuous contact ensures that the back surface 24 will remain optically flat even when composite gain medium assembly 12 experiences significant thermal load. The continuous contact between surface

24 and surface 44 further facilitates the conductive transfer of heat from the gain medium assembly 12 to substrate 46. The substrate 46 may be further installed in an optical mount 60 to facilitate easy positioning and alignment.

[0085] Apart from the contact between the optically flat surfaces 24
5 and 44, which in itself provides a good seal, the atmosphere 58 can be further sealed from the microchannels 48 by an elastomeric seal 62 between the perimeter of the contact surface of composite gain medium assembly 12 and the surface 44. Seal 62 may also hold the composite gain medium assembly 12 to the substrate 46 in the absence of a pressure differential, such as during
10 non-lasing conditions. Using a compliant seal in this area also avoids restraining of the composite gain medium assembly 12 from thermal expansion during lasing and reduces thermal stresses therein. Suitable materials for the elastomeric seal 62 include RTV.RTM. silicon rubber. Other forms of compliant seals such as an O-ring may also be used. Thermal
15 damage to the seal 62 potentially caused by a misalignment of incident laser beam 64 (FIG. 3) is prevented by a collimator 66, which preferably absorbs laser radiation incident on the edge of the laser gain medium 26. The collimator 66 may incorporate suitable cooling means to dissipate absorbed heat.

[0086] Referring further to FIGS. 3 and 4, during lasing, optical pump source 68, which preferably comprises an array of laser diodes, produces and directs optical pump radiation 36 into cylindrical lenses 18. The cylindrical lenses 18 focus the radiation into the converging hollow ducts 20. Internal surfaces 72 of the ducts 20 are made highly reflective to the optical pump radiation. Aided by reflections from surfaces 72, the optical pump radiation 36 gradually increases in intensity as it progresses towards the tapered end of the duct 20. Optical pump radiation 36 exiting the tapered end of the duct 20 enters the undoped optical medium 28 and it is transmitted therethrough into the laser gain medium 26. Tapered portion 28b (FIG. 5a) of
25 the undoped optical medium 28 acts as a continuation of the duct 20 and further concentrates and channels pump radiation into the laser gain medium 26. Upon entering laser gain medium 26, pump radiation is channeled in a
30

direction generally parallel to the surfaces 22 and 24 by multiple internal reflections therefrom. During passage through the laser gain medium 26, the optical pump radiation 36 is gradually absorbed. This absorption process follows Beer's law: $I(x)=I_{\text{sub.}0} \exp(-ax)$, where "x" is the distance into
5 absorbing medium, "a" is the absorption coefficient, " $I_{\text{sub.}0}$ " is the initial intensity of pump radiation, and " $I(x)$ " is pump radiation intensity after traveling distance "x" in the absorbing medium. Preferably, the material of laser gain medium 26 is doped with absorbing species so that 90% or more of incident pump radiation 36 is absorbed in the laser gain medium 26.

10 [0087] Optical radiation 36 absorbed by dopant species in laser gain medium 26 pumps the dopant species to a laser transition. This allows the laser gain medium 26 to serve as an amplifier of coherent optical radiation. The incident laser beam 64, having approximately the same footprint as the aperture in the collimator 66, is directed into the laser gain medium 26 at a
15 generally normal incidence through front surface 22 and is amplified until it reaches the reflective coating 40. On reflection from coating 40, the laser beam passes through the laser gain medium 26 again but in a generally reverse direction. The amplified laser beam 64' exits the laser gain medium 26 in a direction generally normal to the front surface 22. Waste heat dissipated
20 in the laser gain medium 26 is conducted to the back surface 24, through the optical coating 40, and transferred to surface 44 of the substrate 46 from which it is conducted to the heat exchanger 50.

[0088] Undoped optical material 28 serves several functions:

25 [0089] 1) Transport of pump radiation: Undoped optical medium 28 receives concentrated optical radiation 36 from the tapered end of duct 20 and channels it into the laser gain medium 26. In this respect, the undoped optical material 28 serves as a continuation of the duct 20. Surface 34 of material 28 can be curved to provide an additional lensing effect.

30 [0090] 2) Thermal management of perimeter of the laser gain medium 26: The undoped optical material 28 is in good thermal contact with the laser gain medium 26 and provides a heat conduction path to substrate

46. This allows it to draw heat away from the perimeter of the laser gain medium 26 which reduces thermal stresses and distortions therein.

[0091] 3) Suppression of parasitic oscillations: Undoped optical medium 28 is preferably chosen to have an index of refraction closely matching that of laser gain medium 26. This allows ASE rays to cross the boundary between the two materials without significant refection. The shape of the undoped optical medium 28 can be chosen so as to trap such ASE rays and/or channel them outside the composite gain medium assembly 12. By so reducing the feedback of ASE rays from the boundary of composite gain medium assembly 12, the feedback mechanism for parasitic oscillations is largely eliminated and oscillations can be suppressed. In some forms of the invention, the undoped optical medium 28 may be also slightly doped with ions absorbing at laser gain wavelength but not absorbing at optical pump wavelengths. Absorption of ASE rays in the undoped optical medium 28 accelerates their decay.

[0092] FIG. 6 shows examples of several alternative forms of undoped optical material 28 which can be practiced with the present invention.

[0093] FIG. 7 is a front view of the amplifier module 10 showing optical pump source 68, lenses 18, and tapered hollow ducts 20 providing optical pump radiation 36 into the composite gain medium assembly 12 with octagonal doped laser gain medium 26. The circular arrangement of pump source 68 is produced by placing laser diode arrays 68a so as to generally point toward the center of laser gain medium 26. This pump source arrangement makes it possible to achieve laser gain that is uniform across large portions of the laser gain medium 26. Beamlets produced by individual laser diode elements (as for example shown in FIG. 2) in optical pump source 68 overlap inside the laser gain medium 26 and their intensities are summed. The resulting intensity of overlapped beamlets depends on the power output and beamlet divergencies of individual diode elements of each diode array 68a, the distance of the diode elements from the center of the laser gain medium 26, parameters of the lens 18 and the duct 20, the doping density of

laser gain medium 26 and the radial position (with respect to the center of laser gain medium 26) of the location where the intensity is measured.

5 [0094] It is a principal advantage of the present invention that a uniform gain profile is produced in the laser gain medium 26 across the aperture defined by the collimator 66. This is accomplished by choosing an appropriate combination of beamlet divergencies of individual diode elements in optical source 68, by the distance of the diode elements of each diode array 68a from the center of the laser gain medium 26, by the parameters of the lens 18 and the duct 20, and by the doping density of laser gain medium 26.

10 [0095] FIG. 8 shows examples of how the radial variation of small-signal gain is affected by choices of diode divergence (in the plane parallel to surface 22) and diode distance from the center of laser gain medium 26. Besides producing a uniform small-signal gain across the aperture, the present invention can also be used to provide nearly uniform gain when the 15 medium is saturated. For example, when the invention is used to amplify laser beams with higher intensity in the central portion of the beam, the gain saturation effects near the beam center can be countered by appropriately increasing the pumping intensity (and hence small-signal gain) near the center of laser gain medium 26.

20 [0096] An alternate preferred embodiment of the active mirror amplifier of the present invention is suitable for operation at increased optical power density. Referring again to FIGS. 3 and 4, in the alternative embodiment, the internal heat exchanger 50 inside substrate 46 can be omitted and the coolant 52 is provided to microchannels 48 and allowed to 25 directly wet large portions of the back surface 24 of the composite gain medium assembly 12. In this fashion, heat generated in the laser gain medium 26 is conducted through the surface 24 and the optical coating 40 directly into the coolant 52. Coolant 52 is introduced into the microchannels 48 to provide a uniform cooling effect over a large portion of the back surface 30 24 of the gain medium assembly 12. The pressure of coolant 52 is maintained lower than the pressure of atmosphere 58 to assure attachment of composite gain medium assembly 12 to substrate 46 as already explained above.

[0097] Yet another alternative preferred embodiment of the active mirror amplifier of the present invention is suitable for tight packaging. FIG. 9 shows an active mirror amplifier module 10' wherein the optical pump sources 68 and the tapered hollow ducts 20 are mounted in closer proximity to the substrate 46 and optical mount 60. The composite gain medium assembly 12' incorporates undoped optical medium 28' having a surface 70' at approximately a 45 degree angle with respect to the surface 24 (FIG. 5a) of the gain medium assembly 12'. The surface 70' has a coating 74 which is highly reflective at the optical pump radiation wavelengths. Surface 34' of the undoped optical medium has a coating 76 which is antireflective at the optical pump radiation wavelengths. Optical pump radiation 36 is injected into the surface 34' and reflected from coating 74 into the laser gain medium 26.

[0098] The efficiency of concentrating pump radiation in duct 20 can be further improved by stacking laser diode arrays 68a in the plane of pump source 68 to directly point toward the surface 34 of the composite laser gain medium assembly 12 as shown in FIG. 10. This configuration of the pump source 68 also reduces the need for the lens 72 so that the lens can be omitted from the system. Furthermore, the invention can also be practiced with a solid material lensed duct such as disclosed by Beach et al. in U.S. Pat. No. 5,307,430 in lieu of the hollow duct 20. Experience shows that owing to the higher index of refraction, a solid material lensed duct can be more efficient for concentration of pump radiation. However, one drawback of the solid lensed duct in high-average power applications is that low thermal conductivity of the solid duct material (typically optical glass) makes it difficult to remove heat generated therein by pump radiation.

[0099] An alternate approach which combines the advantages of the hollow tapered duct and solid tapered duct concentrators is a liquid-filled tapered duct concentrator shown in FIG.11. Duct walls 72' are essentially identical in shape to those of the hollow duct 20 and are coated for high reflectivity at pump radiation wavelength. A large inlet end 78 and a small outlet end 80 respectively have windows 82 and 84, the windows being made of optical material highly transmissive at pump radiation wavelength and

having appropriate antireflection coatings. The volume enclosed by the duct walls 72' and windows 82 and 84 is filled with liquid 86 that is highly transmissive at pump radiation wavelength. Because liquids have an index of refraction substantially higher than one, the liquid-filled tapered duct will be
5 optically similar to the above-mentioned solid tapered duct. In addition, each of the windows 82, 84 can be curved in one or two planes to provide one or two dimensional lensing effects. Overheating of liquid 86 is prevented by either internally recirculating the liquid to convect heat to the walls 72' which can be maintained at a fixed temperature. Alternately, liquid 86 can be
10 recirculated between duct 20 and an outside heat exchanger (not shown) where heat can be rejected.

[00100] Referring now to FIGS. 12a-12g, during normal operation, the front surface 22 of composite gain medium assembly 12 is relatively hot, while back surface 24 is relatively cold. Consequently, the assembly 12
15 experiences very high compression near front surface 22 and very high tension near back surface 24. If the assembly 12 was unconstrained, the resulting thermal stresses would distort (dish) the medium assembly towards its cooler surface, as shown in FIG. 12b. In a constrained condition shown in FIG. 12c, the medium assembly 12 is flat but experiences increased thermal
20 stresses.

[00101] One approach that reduces thermal stresses under operational conditions is to pre-form the composite gain medium assembly 12 as shown in FIG. 12d. Prior to laser operation, the temperature of the composite gain medium assembly 12 is uniform. When in constrained
25 condition, material near the front surface 22 experiences tension while the material near the back surface 24 experiences compression. However, during laser operation, the front surface 22 heats up while the back surface 24 remains relatively cool. This generally relieves tension near the front surface 22 and the compression near the back surface 24. It can be shown that this
30 approach reduces stresses in the laser medium by about 50% and allows a corresponding increase in power. The tensile and compressive stresses experienced by the laser gain medium assembly 12 when constrained and

unconstrained are illustrated in FIGS.12b, 12c, 12e, 12f and 12g. FIG. 12b illustrates the increased tensile and compressive stresses when the assembly 12 is unconstrained and FIG. 12c when it is constrained to a flat condition while at an operating temperature. FIGS. 12f and 12g illustrate the relief and 5 possible reversal of tensile and compressive stresses when the pre-formed composite gain medium assembly 12 is constrained to a flat condition and at an operating condition.

[00102] The subject invention is not restricted to laser gain medium with planar surfaces. Surface 44 of substrate 46, nominally assumed flat in 10 the embodiments discussed thus far, could just as well be formed to be a part of a spherical surface, or part of a surface of an ellipsoid, paraboloid, or hyperboloid of revolution, or other suitable surface. In such case, the back surface 24 of composite gain medium assembly 12 is also formed so as to match the contour of surface 44 while maintaining uniform thickness of the 15 laser gain medium 26.

[00103] The invention can also be practiced without the substrate 46. Referring now to FIG 13, there is shown a laser amplifier module 10" in accordance with yet another preferred embodiment of the present invention. The module 10" generally comprises a composite gain medium assembly 12', 20 optical pump sources 68, lenses 18, and tapered hollow ducts 20. The composite gain medium assembly 12' is essentially the same as the composite gain medium assembly 12, except that both surfaces 22 and 24 now have the optical coating 42 which is antireflective at a laser gain wavelength. The composite gain medium assembly 12' is preferably 25 suspended by the undoped optical medium 28, which is supported by optical mount 60'.

[00104] The laser gain medium 26 is pumped to a laser transition by the optical pump sources 68 in the same manner as in the amplifier module 10. This allows the laser gain medium 26 to serve as an amplifier of coherent 30 optical radiation. The incident laser beam 64, having approximately the same footprint as the aperture in the collimator 66, is directed into the laser gain medium 26 at a generally normal incidence through surface 24 and is

amplified. The amplified laser beam 64' exits the laser gain medium 26 in a direction generally normal to the surface 22. It should be appreciated that the amplifier module 10" can be also practiced (i.e., positioned) at a Brewster angle with respect to the incident laser beam 64. In this case, the
5 antireflection coating 42 on surfaces 22 and 24 can be omitted.

[00105] Waste heat dissipated in the laser gain medium 26 is conducted to both surfaces 22 and 24, through the optical coating 42, and transferred to coolant 52 flowing generally parallel to the surfaces 22 and 24. The coolant 52 and its flow conditions should be chosen so as to permit a
10 high heat transfer rate while avoiding perturbation to the optical phase front and scattering losses of the laser beams 64 and 64'. A preferred coolant is gaseous helium, although any other suitable coolant could be employed. Experiments with nitrogen and helium flows at subsonic velocities have shown that heat transfer rates on the order of several watts/cm² can be achieved at
15 subsonic flow conditions around Mach 0.2 (see for example S.B. Sutton et al., "Thermal Management in Gas Cooled Solid-State Disk Amplifiers," UCRL-JC-109280, which can be obtained from the technical library of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory).

[00106] FIG. 14 is a front view of the amplifier module 10" showing
20 optical pump sources 68, lenses 18, and tapered hollow ducts 20 providing optical pump radiation 36 into the composite laser gain medium assembly 12'. The laser gain medium assembly 12' has circular doped laser gain medium 26 and octagonal undoped edge 28. The octagonal arrangement of pump sources 68 is produced by placing one or more laser diode arrays 68a at each
25 edge of the octagon so as to generally point toward the center of laser gain medium 26. This pump source arrangement makes it possible to achieve laser gain that is uniform across large portions of the laser gain medium 26 (see, for example, J. Vetrovec, "Progress in the Development of Solid-State Disk Laser," in proc of the 16th Annual Solid-State and Diode Laser
30 Technology Review, May 20-22, 2003, Albuquerque, NM, paper no. HPAPP-6). It should be appreciated that the arrangement of diode sources 68 and the perimeter of undoped medium 28 could have other polygonal shapes, or be

generally circular as shown for example in Figure 7, and as noted above. Furthermore, a laser gain medium 26 with a polygonal perimeter can be practiced with an undoped medium of a different shape (namely circular or elliptical) and conversely, or they can both have the same general shape.

5 [00107] The disk laser amplifier system of the subject invention can be operated in a thermally continuous mode where the heat deposited into the laser gain medium 26 is removed in real time by coolant 52, or in a semi-continuous heat capacity mode where the laser gain medium 26 is allowed to gradually warm up to a predetermined limiting temperature. A solid-state
10 laser operating in the "heat capacity laser", has been disclosed by Albrecht et al. in U.S. Pat. No. 5,526,372. In the heat capacity mode, prior to laser operation, the laser gain medium 26 is cooled to an initial operating temperature. During laser operation, the laser gain medium 26 gradually warms up until it reaches its final operating temperature. At that point the laser
15 operation is suspended and the laser gain medium 26 is allowed to cool again to its initial operating temperature by transferring its stored heat to the coolant 52. After reaching this temperature, the process can be repeated. In this fashion, the laser can be operated in a semi-continuous fashion. The length of the laser cycle depends on the rate at which waste heat is deposited into the
20 laser gain medium, the weight and specific heat (cp) of the laser gain medium and the allowable temperature rise. The length of the cooling cycle depends on the effectiveness of the cooling applied to the laser gain medium. When the amplifier module 10, 10' or 10" operates in the heat capacity mode, the heat can be extracted from the laser gain medium 26 at a much slower rate
25 than the deposition rate during laser operation.

[00108] Any one of the active mirror amplifier modules 10, 10', and 10" or variants thereof can be used to construct laser amplifiers as well as laser oscillators.

30 [00109] Figures 15 and 16 show arrangements of several adjacent modules 10" forming between them passages (flow channels) 90 for flowing a cooling medium 52. In particular, Figure 15 shows a configuration where the spacing between adjacent composite gain medium assemblies 12' and the

width of flow channels 90 are approximately of the same magnitude as the thickness of each gain medium assembly 12'. The size of such spacing depends on the design of the undoped optical medium 28 and the optical pump source 68. In practice, such spacing preferably ranges from about 1 to 5 10 millimeters. The cooling medium in adjacent channels 90 can be flowed in the same or in opposite directions. Although the latter approach somewhat complicates the coolant medium delivery and recovery routing, it greatly reduces the transverse component in temperature gradient inside the gain medium 26 and makes it much easier to maintain alignment and beam quality 10 of the laser beam 64.

[00110] Figure 16 shows an alternate configuration that reduces flow requirements for coolant medium 52. Here the spacing of adjacent composite gain medium assemblies 12' is approximately the same as in the configuration shown Figure 15. However, inserts 92, mounted on holders 80, are installed 15 in the gap between adjacent composite gain medium assemblies 12', thereby reducing the width of the flow channel for coolant medium 52. The preferred width of the coolant channels 90' is approximately in the range from 0.5 to 2.0 millimeters. The resulting reduction in coolant medium flow rates allows using a smaller coolant flow system including smaller sizes of the pumps, storage 20 tanks, and piping. Inserts 92 are each preferably of the same thickness and made of the same material as the host material for the gain medium 26 and do not contain ions for lasing at the laser wavelength of the gain medium 26. Alternatively, the inserts 92 can be made of athermal material that offers low 25 thermo-optic distortion. Furthermore, inserts 92 each preferably have an anti-reflective coating on both large faces to avoid excessive loss of power in laser beam 64 by reflection. As already noted above, the cooling medium in adjacent channels can be flowed in the same direction or in opposite directions (as shown in Figure 16) to reduce thermo-optical distortions in each of the gain mediums 26 and the inserts 92.

30 [00111] Those skilled in the art can now appreciate from the foregoing description that the broad teachings of the present invention can be implemented in a variety of forms. Therefore, while this invention has been

described in connection with particular examples thereof, the true scope of the invention should not be so limited since other modifications will become apparent to the skilled practitioner upon a study of the drawings, specification and following claims.